Rewriting History in Silicon:

Pakistan's Chip Dream Deserves Better Than Selective Memory

In the gleaming halls of power in Islamabad, where grand visions are often announced with the flourish of a press release, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently unveiled the INSPIRE initiative—a bold foray into semiconductor design and research that promises to train 7,200 professionals and etch Pakistan's name into the $600 billion global chip ecosystem. It's a moment ripe for national pride: Rs 4.5 billion committed, nine universities roped in, and a roadmap toward Outsourced Assembly & Testing facilities that could finally wean us off imported silicon. Sharif hailed it as a "milestone in Pakistan's transition to a knowledge-based digital economy," a transformative leap toward self-reliance. And in many ways, it is. The current government deserves applause for scaling up this ambition, injecting fresh funds, and keeping the momentum alive amid economic headwinds. But here's the rub: in their eagerness to claim paternity of this silicon seed, they've conveniently airbrushed the midwives who planted it years ago. It's not just

ungracious—it's a disservice to the very ecosystem they're now nurturing.

Let's rewind the tape, not to Monday-morning quarterback, but to set the record straight. This chip design odyssey didn't spring fully formed from the Sharif playbook in 2025. Its roots burrow deep into the soil of 2021, under the unlikeliest of patrons: the PTI-led Punjab government of Usman Buzdar. Yes, that Buzdar—the one more often lampooned for administrative stumbles than lauded for tech foresight. Yet, in a plot twist worthy of a Karachi

startup pitch, it was precisely under his watch that the province's Higher Education Department greenlit Rs 41.75 million to seed chip design centers at eight public universities. The vision? To arm students and faculty with commercial-grade tools for micro- and nano-electronics, bridging Pakistan's yawning gap in integrated circuit (IC) R&D. Universities like UET Lahore, UET Taxila, ITU Lahore, and Islamia University Bahawalpur were first in line for hardware and software, with the rest—MNS UET Multan, KF UEIT Rahim Yar Khan, University of Gujrat, and University of Chakwal—slated to follow. This wasn't pie-in-the-sky policy; it was a phased rollout, born of a committee stacked with vice chancellors and IT experts, all orchestrated to churn out industry-ready talent.

At the heart of this improbable origin story stood two figures whose passion for pixels and processors outshone the era's political noise: Raja Yasir Humayun Sarfraz, then Punjab's Minister for Higher Education, and Dr. Syed Mansoor Sarwar, Vice Chancellor of UET Lahore. Raja Yasir, a software engineer with a pedigree from a top American university, wasn't content with ribbon-cuttings. He constituted the oversight committee himself, nominating Dr. Sarwar as convener and rallying domain experts to confront our lag in nano-electronics head-on. "We need to train our faculty and students," he insisted, eyeing a future where Pakistani grads could compete globally, not just code for overseas gigs. Dr. Sarwar, the quiet force multiplier, didn't just convene—he catalyzed. Under his leadership at UET, the IC design and testing lab hummed to life, fueled by that initial provincial funding. And in a feat that still beggs belief, his team—led by the likes of Umer Shahid, Abdul Wadood, and Prof. Muhammad Tahir—delivered the UETRV ESoC, an open-source System on Chip (SoC) blending a RISC-V processor with motor controls for embedded wizardry. Conceived, designed, and verified in under a year, this masterpiece snagged a spot in Google's Open Source MPW-5 Shuttle for fabrication. By May 2022, it was GitHub gold, a testament to homegrown ingenuity amid a world reeling from chip shortages. Fast-forward to today, and the Sharif government's INSPIRE rollout builds on this bedrock. It's commendable: expanding to national scope, looping in southern and central universities, and pledging "no issue" on funding to fast-track labs and curricula. In an era of geopolitical flux—think U.S.-China chip wars and supply chain snarls—scaling Punjab's pilot to a federal blueprint is strategic savvy. The IT Ministry's collaboration with the Pakistan Software Export Board and Special Investment Facilitation Council signals a maturing ecosystem, one that could lure fabs and foster a trillion-dollar ripple effect. Credit where it's due: this continuity keeps the dream from fizzling.

Yet, honesty isn't a zero-sum game, and that's where the current administration stumbles—and stumbles hard. In the launch fanfare, where Sharif waxed poetic about "preparing Pakistan's youth for future industries," there was nary a nod to the Buzdar-era pioneers. No mention of Raja Yasir's committee, no salute to Dr. Sarwar's lab that birthed our first fab-ready SoC. It's as if the 2021 funding approval, the 2022 design triumph, evaporated in some bureaucratic memory wipe. This isn't mere oversight; it's a pattern of political mythmaking that erodes trust. Why claim "first-time" laurels for an initiative whose blueprints were drafted when your rivals held the pen? Acknowledging the past doesn't dilute your present—it burnishes it. Imagine the narrative power: "Building on Punjab's bold start under Raja Yasir and Dr. Sarwar, we're taking Pakistan's

chip revolution global." Instead, we get selective amnesia, turning innovators into footnotes and risking the very collaboration INSPIRE needs to thrive.

Pakistan's semiconductor saga is no one's solo act—it's a relay, passed from provincial labs to federal podiums. The Sharif government has the baton now; run with it, by all means. But spare us the rewrite that erases the handoff. Give Raja Yasir and Dr. Mansoor Sarwar their due—not as relics of a bygone regime, but as architects of the foundation you're so proudly expanding. In the end, true self-reliance isn't just about fabricating chips; it's about fabricating a history we can all stand behind. Anything less, and we're just debugging someone else's code.

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